

Presentation Zen

A review by John R. Carter, Sr.

I've been studying about presentation techniques lately. It started with a DVD called "Presentation Zen" with Garr Reynolds (<http://www.presentationzen.com/>). It's a rather long movie showing Garr talking to Google employees on how to create and deliver a good presentation. I thought it was quite well done. But like I said, a bit long. The credits at the end were mixed with some funny outtakes which are worth watching. That's certainly one good way to get you to watch the credits.

Garr insists that slides never contain "bullets" or "lists" and that each point should be accompanied by simple graphics to help make the point. I used to make slides that had animated text that scrolled or snapped into view. At the end, I was left with yet another complicated slide with small font size and absolutely no catchy graphics to help rivet the idea of each point I talked about. I can see the point of what Garr talked about - now. Wish I had seen that DVD a long time ago.

We have that DVD in the PMUG library if anyone is interested in viewing it.

Using the references given by Garr in the movie, I did some research on the Internet for more information on the art of designing and delivering a good presentation. This two minute movie shows Guy Kawasaki talking about what he believes is optimal for any presentation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQLdRk0Ziw>

10 slides, 20 minutes, 30pt text? Okay. That might be good enough for telling stories, but in my view it is hardly acceptable for an in-depth, technical talk, or so I want to believe. Garr's perspective on a good presentation is a bit more lenient while still allowing for the Keep-It-Short-and-Simple idea.

There are lots of articles and short movies on the Internet that really make sense to me about what makes a good presentation. It amounts to "more talk and less slides," and slides with very few words and with complementary, simple graphics. The overall concept is that the presenter is the focus of the presentation, not the slides. If the presenter needs supporting evidence for any part of the talk, throw up a catchy slide. And in many cases, as Garr points out throughout the movie, slides with graphics and no text does a real good job of "paraphrasing" what the presenter is talking about.

Another thing I learned in my travels is that an audience can't sit still for more than about 20 minutes, so if the presentation has to go beyond that time frame, it would be best to provide some alternative material to break up the monotony and still allow that the material is relevant to the topic and be useful as a segue from one major point to the next.

Recently, I gave a talk on GnuCash, a free, open-source financial management application with an emphasis on double-entry accounting techniques. I had lots of slides with detailed images of screen shots. The text in the screen shots was way too small for anyone to read and the detail was way too complex to give a good feel for what I was talking about. I'm sure now I can redesign that presentation to fit the above criteria and do a much better job of explaining the basics of what that application does and why anyone should use it.